

## **Our History**

### **Why did the community move to West London and specifically the Shepherds Bush area?**

In 1908 the Franco-British trade exhibition was held at the newly erected White City and many came to exhibit goods, particularly Turkish carpets and textiles. After the exhibition, they stayed on in the area. The burgeoning community were joined at the onset of the First World War by many more young men who came to Britain to avoid conscription into the Turkish army.

By 1916 the community numbered some seven hundred families who wanted their own place of worship. It took twelve years of hard work before they had raised enough money which, together with a large bequest, enabled a plot of land to be bought in St James's Gardens, and the synagogue to be erected. It opened its doors for the first time at the end of 1928.

The coming together of these Jews from both Greece and Turkey was not without its difficulties. Each group had their own ideas, and it took great effort by the leadership to bring these fairly disparate groups together successfully. But succeed they did, and a unique warmth still pervades the traditional services which have their own liturgy and traditions embedded into the very body of this beautiful building.

Holland Park Synagogue has maintained its independence and has over the years attracted Sephardi Jews from all over the world who have come to London and found their spiritual home in a special place of worship that is full of warmth and hospitality.

Members from countries as diverse as Iran, Iraq, Egypt, France, Italy, Israel and the Sudan as well as the original founding families, whose descendants, now fifth and sixth generations on, still continue to worship and come together as a community in Holland Park and share the joy of practising their faith in an architecturally beautiful and spiritually uplifting building.

# **The Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, Holland Park**

## **The roots of the founding community**

Jews had lived in Turkey from early times: there was a community at the time of Alexander the Great; and there are ruins of synagogues in Turkey dating from Roman times. However, substantial numbers of Jews began to settle in Turkey from the 13th century.

The greatest influx came during the reign of Bayezid II (1481–1512), as a direct result of the expulsion of Jews from Europe, not just from Spain and Portugal but also from Sicily, France and Hungary.

On hearing the orders of the expulsion from Spain, Bayezid II is recorded as having instructed the governors of the Ottoman provinces “not to refuse the Jews entry or cause them difficulties, but to receive them cordially”. Thus, Turkey became a haven for Jews fleeing the expulsions.

The Spanish Jews settled chiefly in Constantinople, Salonika, Safed, Jerusalem, Damascus, Alexandria, Cairo and Bursa. From then on, Jewish culture flourished in the Ottoman Empire. The Spanish Jews introduced their traditions into the Turkish liturgy as well as their Hebraic, Spanish language, Ladino.

Many of our congregants' names reflect their origins:

- Saragoussi from Zaragoza, Spain
- Carmona from Carmona, Spain
- Toledano from Toledo, Spain
- Behar from Bejar, Spain
- Molina (a miller in Spanish)
- Da Costa (Portuguese)
- Mendoza (Spanish)
- Molho (Portuguese)
- Pereira (Portuguese for pear tree)
- Coenca from Coenca, Spain
- Medina, Spain

to name just a few.

## **The foundation of the synagogue**

The Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, Holland Park, was founded by immigrants from Salonika and Istanbul, who began to arrive in Britain from the turn of the 20th century.

They had a liturgy and customs that differed from those of the established communities in Britain, including their spoken language, Ladino (Judeo-Español) – still spoken over 400 years after the expulsion from Spain. Some settled in Shoreditch near the Bevis Marks Synagogue whose community had a liturgy (minhag) that was close to their own.

In 1908, a large influx of families arrived from Salonika and Constantinople (now Istanbul) to market their wares at the Franco-British Exhibition. Their goods included fine carpets, textiles and tobacco. This public fair was held at White City from May to October and attracted 8 million visitors.

Many of these exhibitors never returned after the fair closed, but settled close to White City in the Shepherds Bush area. Gradually they were joined by earlier immigrants who had first alighted in Shoreditch, London.

By this time, regular services were being held and a part time minister was appointed. The earlier immigrants, in due course, joined the management and were eventually persuaded to assist with the building of the Holland Park Synagogue.

Many more young men arrived at the onset of the First World War as they did not wish to be conscripted into the Turkish army. Unfortunately, because Turkey was allied with Germany, and despite the fact that Salonika had been part of Greece since 1912, many male members of the communities were interned until 1917.

One of our founders, Mr Vitali Elnecavé, was appointed the representative of the self-titled Sephardi Congregation of Levantine Jews to help release the internees. They were finally released upon the personal guarantee of the Haham (Chief Rabbi) Dr Moses Gaster, of the Spanish & Portuguese Jews' Congregation.

## **The building of the synagogue**

After the First World War the community decided to build its own synagogue in West London. But the members were very poor. Donations were collected at the rate of 6d per week (2.5p today). Mr Jack Cohen and others would set out on bicycles in all weathers to collect the money.

A fundraising committee was set up in 1920 and in 1924 a plot of land was purchased in St James's Gardens for £1,500 – £750 in cash and a £750 mortgage from Lloyds Bank. In 1926 a deal was struck with the existing Spanish and Portuguese Jews' Congregation at Bevis Marks who purchased the land for £1,500 and granted the synagogue a lease for 999 years at £50 per annum.

The building costs were estimated at around £8,000. The Sir Sassoon David Trust donated £5,000 towards the building costs and the Synagogue is named Sha'ar Hashamayim Kneseth Sassoon David in his honour (Sha'ar Hashamayim being the Spanish & Portuguese Jews' Congregation).

In June 1928 an additional piece of land was purchased for the Semoff Hall. The foundation stone was laid on 10 June. In October that same year the adjoining house was purchased for £1,775 to accommodate the synagogue minister. The synagogue was finally consecrated on 9 December 1928. There were no pews and no communal hall.

In 1929 the Sassoon David Trust donated a further £5,000 which enabled all works to be completed. The communal hall was constructed in 1930 and over 80 children attended the Chanukah party in the hall that year. A photograph of the party hangs in the hall.

More recently a second floor was built over the hall and more recently still the hall was extended to create a permanent Succah.

### **Salonika reflection**

On a sad note, the Jewish community which remained in Salonika suffered two terrible tragedies. The Great Thessaloniki Fire of 1917 was a disaster for the community. The Jewish community was concentrated in the lower part of town and was badly affected: the fire destroyed 16 of 33 synagogues and left 52,000 Jews homeless.

During the Holocaust, Salonika's 54,000 Jews were shipped to the Nazi extermination camps. More than 90% never returned. Only the Polish Jews experienced a greater level of destruction.

### **The synagogue today**

We are an orthodox community. Our services are recited in Hebrew with additional prayers in Ladino; men and women sit separately.

Over the past 90 years the synagogue has continued to evolve. The founding families still have a strong presence on our membership although many no longer live in the immediate vicinity of the Synagogue. The Synagogue has been a welcoming place for all Jews – and we have had several influxes of new members, for example, from post-war migrations: from Iraq in 1950, from Egypt in 1956 and, more recently, from France.